



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOUT

Gout is a painful condition that occurs when the bodily waste product uric acid is deposited as needle-like crystals in the joints and/or soft tissues. In the joints, these uric acid crystals cause inflammatory arthritis, which in turn leads to intermittent swelling, redness, heat, pain, and stiffness in the joints.

Uric acid is a substance that results from the breakdown of purines. A normal part of all human tissue, purines are found in many foods. Normally, uric acid is dissolved in the blood and passed through the kidneys into the urine, where it is eliminated.

WHAT CAUSES GOUT?

A number of risk factors are associated with hyperuricemia and gout. They include:

- **Genetics.** Many people with gout have a family history of the disease. Estimates range from 20 to 80 percent.
- **Gender and age.** It is more common in men than in women and more common in adults than in children.
- **Weight.** Being overweight increases the risk of developing hyperuricemia and gout because there is more tissue available for turnover or breakdown, which leads to excess uric acid production.
- **Alcohol consumption.** Drinking too much alcohol can lead to hyperuricemia, because alcohol interferes with the removal of uric acid from the body.
- **Diet.** Eating too many foods that are rich in purines can cause or aggravate gout in some people. These foods include anchovies, asparagus, beef kidneys, dried beans and peas, game meats, mushrooms and gravy.
- **Lead exposure.** In some cases, exposure to lead in the environment can cause gout.

HOW IS GOUT DIAGNOSED?

Gout may be difficult for doctors to diagnose because the symptoms can be vague, and gout often mimics other conditions. To confirm a diagnosis of gout, a doctor may insert a needle into an inflamed joint and draw a sample of synovial fluid, the substance that lubricates a joint. The joint fluid is placed on a slide and examined under a microscope for uric acid crystals. Their absence, however, does not completely rule out the diagnosis.

The doctor also may find it helpful to look for uric acid crystals around joints to diagnose gout. Gout attacks may mimic joint infections, and a doctor who suspects a joint infection (rather than gout) may also culture the joint fluid to see whether bacteria are present.

HOW IS GOUT TREATED?

With proper treatment, most people who have gout are able to control their symptoms and live productive lives. Gout can be treated with one or a combination of therapies. The goals of treatment are to ease the pain associated with acute attacks, to prevent future attacks, and to avoid the formation of tophi and kidney stones. Successful treatment can reduce discomfort caused by the symptoms of gout, as well as long-term damage to the affected joints.

The most common treatments for an acute attack of gout are nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) taken orally (by mouth), or corticosteroids, which are taken orally or injected into the affected joint. NSAIDs reduce the inflammation caused by deposits of uric acid crystals, but have no effect on the amount of uric acid in the body.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE WITH GOUT DO TO STAY HEALTHY?

People with gout can decrease the severity of attacks and reduce their risk of future attacks by taking their medications as prescribed. Other steps you can take to stay healthy and minimize gout's effect on your life include the following:

- Tell your doctor about all the medicines and vitamins you take. He or she can tell you if any of them increase your risk of hyperuricemia.
- Plan follow-up visits with your doctor to evaluate your progress.
- Drink plenty of nonalcoholic fluids, especially water. Nonalcoholic fluids help remove uric acid from the body. Alcohol, on the other hand, can raise the levels of uric acid in your blood.
- Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy body weight. Lose weight if you are overweight, but avoid low-carbohydrate diets that are designed for quick weight loss.
- Avoid foods that are high in purines.